

The
Melville Society
N E W S L E T T E R

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Jerry Winters' half-hour film entitled *Herman Melville's Moby Dick*, in color, opened May 23 at the Paris Theatre, New York City, on the same bill with *The Great Adventure*. The film is based upon a series of over 200 drawings by Gil Wilson, honorary member of the Society. Thomas Mitchell is the narrator, and an original musical score was composed by Richard Mohaupt. The picture will be distributed nationally by Joseph Burstyn, Inc.

ORSON WELLES AS AHAB

Unusual critical interest has been aroused by the presentation in blank verse of an adaptation of *Moby-Dick* written and produced by Orson Welles in London. The play ran for approximately three and a half weeks this summer at the Duke of York's Theater. Welles played Captain Ahab, Father Mapple, and a theater manager. The setting consisted of a bare stage intended to represent a smalltown American theater of the late nineteen-hundreds with a cast assembled for a routine rehearsal.

Ronald Mason, one of our members, attended a performance and has kindly sent the following report:

"The production proved strangely impressive; the absolute minimum of scenery and costume suggested an elaborate impressionistic charade rather than a conventional drama. This effect was (perhaps deliberately) intensified by the device of framing the piece in an imagined rehearsal by a group of repertory players. Both Howard Vincent [currently teaching in France] and I found the device distracting and ultimately superfluous, taking up valuable playing time and giving little perspective in return. Other more objective playgoers in the party found it less irksome. With this proviso I do not think Welles can be seriously faulted for a remarkable feat of imaginative representation; within a wonderful changing framework of coiled ropes, boxes, planks, etc., and brilliantly manipulated lighting, he made Melville's language turn on its own drama and assisted it with some striking miming. Assisted by two very fine and sincere performances of Ishmael and Starbuck, Welles himself centralized the drama in the superb declamatory rhetoric that Melville gave to Ahab; his own performance of this part had depth, intensity, and a sort of Lear-like tragedy. He also played Father

Mapple, but we were both emphatic that he cut the sermon reprehensibly and ruined its essential architecture. The beautiful overtones of his voice in this part only emphasized how much more effective it would have been had he allowed the main lines of the sermon to develop as a key theme of the play, as they do in the book. By contrast, a very imaginative and successful piece of adaptation was the incorporation of the great 'Whiteness' chapter into a soliloquy by Ahab on contemplating the contrasting 'blackness' of the crazed Pip. This we felt was apt and appropriate and argued a very sensitive sympathy with Melville's metaphysical thought.

"The inescapable factor in the evening's experience was the astonishingly Shakespearean quality of the language. Welles had been for the most part unusually faithful to the text; and though we knew (academically) all about Melville's debt to Shakespeare, to hear it and experience it on a kind of Shakespearean stage made it at last no academic point but a blazing certainty — that in Melville we have the unique spectacle of a man who could write like Shakespeare without disgracing either Shakespeare or himself."

NOTE: "THE COMING STORM"

Confusion exists concerning the artist who painted the picture called *The Coming Storm*, which inspired Melville to write his poem of the same title. There were two artists named Gifford, with initials the same but reversed, "S. R." and "R. S."

Melville (correctly, by the way) identifies the artist in his note heading the poem as "S. R. Gifford" (see *Collected Poems*, ed. Howard P. Vincent, p. 94). Yet Vincent surprisingly and incorrectly notes (p. 456) that the artist is Robert Swain Gifford. The error also appears in Jay Leyda's *Melville Log* (Vol. II, p. 674) as "R. Swain Gifford." In Leon Howard's recent biography (p. 278) Melville's original designation, "S. R. Gifford," is mentioned.

The facts are these: *The Coming Storm* was painted by Sanford (or Sanford) Robinson Gifford (1823-1880). Robert Swain Gifford (1840-1905), however, painted in the same genre as his contemporary of the same last name — American scenes and landscapes. Both artists were represented in

the 1865 exhibition of the National Academy of Design, which Melville visited. The painting in question is clearly identified in the catalogue of that exhibition as Number 85.

At the time the picture belonged to Edwin Booth. It is now in the possession of Miss Edith Wilkinson of Poughkeepsie, New York.

—Dan Vogel

ADDITION TO MELVILLE LOG

Sidney Kaplan reports the following item concerning Melville in the *Boston Daily Times* for November 21, 1850. While previously noted by Melville scholars, it appears not to be mentioned in *The Melville Log*.

"Herman Melville, the popular young author, has purchased a farm in Berkshire county, Mass., about thirty miles from Albany, where he intends to raise pigs, poultry, turnips, babies, and other vegetables."

NOTES

Is Melville scholarship falling off? Several members have remarked recently that the furious pace at which Melville studies materialized in the forties appears to have slackened recently. No one at present is known to be working on a new biography of Melville. Only a few doctoral studies have come to the attention of the secretary during the past year. While progress has been reported on an edition of the letters and on a bibliography, the general impression seems to be that Melville scholars are settling down. For young scholars interested in studying Melville, this may be a good time to consider a re-assessment of the exciting but highly speculative research of the thirties, when almost everyone had a theory about Melville. Today's young scholars may wish to substitute patient and objective digging into facts for the very personal interpretations of Melville's ideas which were presented by their elders.

No plans have been reported as yet for an annual meeting of the Society. If past policy is followed, there may be an opportunity for members to meet either formally or informally during the December convention of the Modern Language Association in Chicago. Those who desire a meeting and have ideas for a program are invited to send their suggestions to the secretary or to our president, Harrison Hayford, Department of English, Northwestern University, Evanston, Illinois.

A recent publication of Hastings House (at \$4.00) is *Cloud of Islands*, by W. I. B. Crealock. This is described as the record of a voyage in a small boat through the South Seas. Among the islands visited were the Galapagos and the Marquesas, and a special visit was paid to Melville's Typee. The book includes 16 pages of photographs.

Dan Vogel is preparing at New York University a doctoral dissertation to be entitled "A Critical Study of Melville's Shorter Published Verse."

Query: What evidence exists for the notion, affirmed by several writers on Melville, that one of his favorite books was that popular description of travel in the Near East, *Eothen*?

Brain teaser: A famous author speaks of the hero in one of his books as "being determined to seek his fortune at sea, or rather, indeed, to fly away from his fortune on shore." Is it Melville? At first glance one would be tempted to say so. But see the first paragraph of Book VII, Chapter X, in Fielding's *Tom Jones*.

Since one of the purposes of the Melville Society, and perhaps its major one, is to facilitate the exchange of information among its members, the secretary urges all members to address to him for publication in the Newsletter their queries on matters relating to Melville, their explications of difficult passages in Melville's works, newly discovered minutiae dealing with Melville's life or his writings, news of scholarly projects on which they are working, and interesting facts about themselves. The secretary depends on members to inform him of what is going on in the world of Melville scholarship. Welcome also, of course, are brief essays and comments presenting various points of view or suggestions for activities in which the Society ought to engage. (One project which has been proposed within the past year is a volume of essays by several different scholars dealing with Melville's later years.) It should be kept in mind that the Newsletter concerns itself primarily with news and that it has no intention of usurping the functions of the standard scholarly journals.

This issue of the Newsletter arrives a bit late. For that reason a number of members have not yet received notices regarding membership fees for 1955. For those who have not yet paid their current dues, such notices are enclosed with the present number.

THE *Melville Society* NEWSLETTER
IS PUBLISHED QUARTERLY FOR MEMBERS OF THE
Melville Society, a group of literary scholars and others interested
in the life and works of Herman Melville. The Society seeks to
facilitate the exchange of information among its members, to
stimulate the study of Melville's life and works, and to encourage
literary, historical, and bibliographical research. Membership is
two dollars per year and includes all services of the Society. Asso-
ciate membership (non-voting) is one dollar per year and includes
all issues of the Newsletter. Address Tyrus Hillway, secretary, at
Colorado State College, Greeley, Colorado.